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Challenge to Missionaries: The Religious Worlds of New France

BY

DANIEL A. SCALBERG



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From the Bishop's palace on the bluff overlooking the Saint Lawrence at Québec City late in 1725, an aging but articulate Jean Baptiste de Saint-Vallier, filling out his fortieth annual report for authorities back in France, attempted to describe the spiritual condition of his vast American diocese.¹ The diocese of Québec was perhaps "the most wretched and difficult of all the French dioceses in mission lands."² It was immense, taking in the greater part of the territories already explored in North America: Newfoundland, Acadia, the valley of the Saint Lawrence, the region of the Great Lakes, and even the whole drainage area of the Mississippi. A diocese on a continental scale. And what parishioners! Nine out of ten were Indians, who remained resistant to

¹National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), France: Archives des Colonies, Correspondance générale, Canada, MG1, série C11A, vol. 47, pp. 265-73, L'Évêque de Québec à (document illegible), 4 octobre 1725. The manuscript sources for the ministry of Bishop Saint-Vallier are abundant. The most important are located in the Archives du Séminaire de Québec (hereafter ASQ). It should be noted that the series Lettres at the ASQ contains the voluminous seminary correspondence between Québec and Paris. In addition, a great quantity of documentation on Saint-Vallier's episcopacy can be found in Paris at the Archives des Colonies under the séries C11A, Correspondance générale, Canada. Transcriptions and microfilms of this material are located in Ottawa at the National Archives of Canada. Useful scholarly monographs are: Alfred Rambaud, "La vie orageuse et douloureuse de Mgr de Saint-Vallier, deuxième évêque de Québec (1653-1727)," *Revue Université Laval* 9 (1954):90-108 and Étienne Marchand, "Les troubles de l'Église du Canada en 1728," *BRH* 3 (1897):117-21. Guy Plante, *Le Rigorisme au XVII^e siècle: Mgr de Saint-Vallier et le sacrement de pénitence* (Gémbloux: 1971), argues that the austere religiosity of Saint-Vallier was not related to Jansenism. Gordon Dixon, "The Episcopate of Mgr de Saint-Vallier, 1688-1727," Master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1980, places the episcopacy of Saint-Vallier in the context of post-Tridentine Catholic reform.

²David M. Hayne, ed., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 3 vols. (Toronto: 1982), 2:382.

the encroachment of French Catholicism. In the midst of sovereign Amerindian territory were a few scattered French settlers, barely more than 30,000.³ Some led exemplary Christian lives, much of the credit due to Saint-Vallier's pedagogical skill displayed in the new catechism he composed for the diocese in 1702.⁴

Nevertheless, in 1725, the bishop reflected more on the dangers faced by the Church in North America than on its limited successes. Forced to report that the brandy traffic associated with the fur trade was ruining the work of the missions, Saint-Vallier wrote that hundreds of French youth, about 6 percent of the colonial population according to the police intendant, were drawn by the lure of quick profit into the illegal fur trade in the "upper country [*pays d'en haut*]."⁵ There, living a free life, far from the constraints of colonial authority, the *coureurs de bois* (French engaged in the fur trade without a government permit) undermined missionary labor by trading brandy and guns for *castor gras* (greasy beaver fur).⁶

Religious life back in the colony's population centers, noted the bishop, was little better than that practiced on the Illinois frontier. A Sunday observance at Montréal parishes differed little from one in Old France. The inhabitants of New France, according to the bishop, followed their own inclinations in church rather than the clerically sanctioned proprieties and formalities. Some settlers came to church drunk, and others smoked at the church door or talked loudly during mass. Staring, gossiping, and shuffling of feet were commonly employed methods of passing the time or expressing annoyance at an overly long sermon.⁷ Others were content to divide the time between racing their

³Cameron Nish, *The French Regime in Canada*, 2 vols. (Scarborough, Ontario: 1965), 1:appendix A. For original census documents see: NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 99, f. 533v., 1737.

⁴Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Vallier, *Catéchisme du diocèse de Québec* (Paris: 1702), Reprint (Montréal: 1958).

⁵NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 47, pp. 265-73, L'Évêque de Québec à (document illegible), 4 octobre 1725; in November of 1679, Intendant Jacques Duchesneau estimated the number of illegal fur traders in the woods at "500 or 600, not including those who are leaving every day," NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 5, p. 52, Duchesneau au ministre, 10 novembre 1679; in 1680, Duchesneau revised his count of the *coureurs de bois* when he estimated that there were at least 800 off in the wilderness adding, "I have been unable to ascertain the exact number because everyone associated with them covers up for them," NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 5, p. 168, Duchesneau au Ministre, 13 novembre 1680.

⁶Daniel A. Scalberg, "Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth-Century Perceptions of Coureur de Bois Religious Life," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 17 (Santa Barbara: 1990):82-83.

⁷ASQ, Manuscrits 284, De l'intention avec laquelle on doit demeurer dans le Séminaire, 1679; ASQ, Évêques de Québec, no. 207, Petite note sur le spirituel de certain paroissiens de St. Michel, sans date.

mounts and discussing "theology" at the neighboring cabaret.⁸ Even inside the church, threats, scuffles, and brawls were not uncommon (usually over precedence in seating or the setting of the tithe) and women's clothes were far too revealing (or so complained the Bishop).⁹ Sadly, concluded a frustrated Bishop Saint-Vallier, most *canadiens* were not exemplars of Christian virtue.¹⁰

The French, as Bishop Saint-Vallier well knew, were not alone in North America. They were invaders of Algonquin and Iroquois regions of sovereignty. The initial French settlement policy called for the "Francisation" of the Amerindians.¹¹ The colonial governors and intendants, following the policies dictated from Versailles, encouraged *métissage* or mixed marriages, assuming that any unions would make Catholic French out of the Indian brides. This policy was a disaster for the French. Church leaders were the first to recognize it and sound the alarm. Mother Marie de l'Incarnation, the gifted superior of the Ursuline order at Québec, wrote to the bishop of Rouen stating that efforts to "francize" the Indians were shortsighted. Rather than converting the Indians, she argued, it was the French who were converted to the Indian way of life.¹² By 1685 Governor Denonville was echoing clerical sentiments when he wrote that "hundreds of our young French go out and

⁸NAC, MG1, série F3, vol. 9, ff. 159-60, microfilm, bobine F385, Ordonnance de Raudot au sujet du respect qu'il faut observer dans les églises en raison de certains scandales, 22 mars 1710; NAC, MG1, série F3, vol. 9, f. 346, microfilm, bobine F-385, Ordonnance de M. Bégon, portant défense aux habitants de faire galoper leurs chevaux à la sortie de la grande messe, 29 février 1716.

⁹Archives de l'Archidiocèse de Québec (hereafter AAQ), Registre des insinuations ecclésiastiques, série 12A, vol. A, no 172, p. 130, Mandement contre le luxe et vanité des femmes et filles dans l'église, 26 février 1682.

¹⁰Daniel A. Scalberg, "Religious Life in New France Under the Laval and Saint-Vallier Bishops: 1659-1728," Ph.D. diss. (University of Oregon: 1990).

¹¹*Rapport de l'archiviste de la province de Québec* (hereafter RAPQ), 25 vols. (Québec: Imprimeur de sa Majesté le Roi/la Reine, 1921-1946), 1930-1931, p. 95, Colbert à Talon, 20 février 1668; Olive Patricia Dickason writes that "France officially supported a policy of one race throughout the seventeenth century." (O. P. Dickason, "From One Nation in the Northeast to New Nation in the Northwest: A Look at the Emergence of the Métis" in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America*, Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds. [Lincoln: 1985], 21); for further discussion of this topic, see Olive P. Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Norman, Oklahoma: 1992).

¹²Marie de l'Incarnation, *Lettres de la vénérable mère Marie de l'Incarnation, première supérieure des ursulines de la Nouvelle France* (Paris: 1681), 610, Québec, 16 octobre, 1666; James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: 1985), 302; Cornelius Jaenen, *Friend and Foe: Aspects of French-Amerindian Cultural Contact in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: 1976), 185. In essential agreement with James Axtell, Jaenen states, "The French never ceased to marvel at how successfully Amerindian tribes could integrate non-members, including some European captives, into their societies. This was especially remarkable in view of the lack of success of their own program of Frenchification of the natives."

live as Indians among the tribes and there is no stopping them. Each race tends to absorb the worst features of the other."¹³ Late seventeenth-century French officials became so concerned about this drain of young French into the woods (and the glut of fur on the European market) that they restricted access to the *pays d'en haut* to twenty-five permits per year.¹⁴ To no avail, the young inhabitants sneaked out of town to exchange brandy for fur on the illegal market. The government at Québec countered by clamping down on clandestine traders at Montréal fur fairs. Consequently, the illegals, went to Fort Orange to unload their fur.¹⁵

French authorities had no better luck controlling the illegal flow of brandy and furs than modern law enforcement officers do in checking the interstate cocaine trade. Just as drug gangs in Chicago or Portland form a subculture with their own dress, values, and speech, so the illegal trade in New France fostered its own despised subculture. Twenty year old Frenchmen, to the scandal of Montréal society, dressed in the fashion of the Indian, tattooed their arms, legs, and faces, greased their hair, strolled bare-legged through town, smoked tobacco, raced canoes, spoke tribal dialects, adopted Indian names, married according to Indian custom, deserted the Church in droves, and raised their *métis* children *à la façon du pays*.¹⁶ By 1690 the police intendant Champigny

¹³NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 7, pp. 45-46, Denonville à Seignelay, 13 novembre 1685; Jaenen, Friend and Foe, 183.

¹⁴NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 5, p. 52, Duchesneau au Ministre, 10 novembre 1679; NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 22, ff. 362-64, Mémoire de Denis Riverin à Pontchartrain, 12 décembre 1705; NAC, MG1, série C11G, vol. 6, ff. 80-81, Mémoire sur la congés de Philippe du Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil et Jacques Raudot, 1710; NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 3, p. 88, Talon à Colbert, 10 novembre 1670; NAC, MG8, C8, Nouvelle-France: Congés et permis enregistres à Montréal, microfilm, bobine C-13986, 1681-1730.

¹⁵*Mandements, lettres pastorales et circulaires des évêques de Québec*, Mgr H. Têtu and Abbé C.O. Gagnon, eds., vols. 1 and 2 (Québec: 1887-1888):1:511-12, Circulaire défendant aux curés d'absoudre les cabaretiers, 11 janvier 1724; NAC, Actes du pouvoir souverain, MG1, série A, vol. 21, ff. 128-29, Règlement du Conseil Supérieur de Québec au sujet des permission de tenir cabaret, 5 août 1715, NAC, Lettres expédiées par le Ministère de la Marine, MG1, série B, vol. 45, ff. 809-23, microfilm, bobine F-240, Mémoire du Roi à M. de Vaudreuil et Bégon, 8 juin 1727; NAC, MG1, série A, vol. 1, ff. 110-111, Le Roy ayant été informé que la multiplicité des Cabarets qui sont établis dans les côtes de la Nouvelle France y attire beaucoup de désordre et occasionne la débauche des habitants, à Versailles, 22 mai 1724; NAC, MG1, série A, no. 12, f. 110, microfilm, bobine F-9894, Arrêt de 22 mai portant règlements sur le nombre de permissions que l'intendant dans la Nouvelle France est autorisé d'accorder à ceux des habitants tenant des cabarets, 22 mai 1724; ASQ, Polygraphie 4, no. 70, Ordonnance de Claude Dupuy qui règle les cabarets, auberges, hôtellerie, et chambres garnies, 22 novembre 1726.

¹⁶NAC, MG1, série C13A, ff. 820-24, Duclos à ministre, 25 décembre 1715; NAC, MG1, série C13A, vol. 3, p. 478, Cadillac au Ministre, 6 août 1712; NAC, MG1, série C13A, vol. 3, p. 426, Cadillac au Ministre, 20 février 1714; NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 22, ff. 362-64, Mémoire de Denis Riverin à Pontchartrain, 12 décembre 1705; Yves F. Zoltvany, *The French Tradition in America* (Columbia, South Carolina: 1969), 103-06. Professor Zoltvany has translated a portion of this document into English. I have largely followed his transcription.

confided to the newly appointed bishop that he did not have enough jail space to hold all the illegal *voyageurs* even if he could round them all up.¹⁷ Even worse, the Governors Frontenac and Vaudreuil were convicted by the high court at Québec of profiteering from the traffic in the illegal trade. They sold trading licenses to the highest bidders and friends only.¹⁸

It should not surprise us that at the turn of the century Bishop Saint-Vallier wrote to his superiors back home that "the faith is in danger of perishing in New France, not from British force of arms but from the irreligion of the French and the failure of the mission enterprise."¹⁹ Strong words from a man of the cloth, nevertheless, the bishop was more in touch with the pressures the French Church faced than many modern historians of the American scene, who often, following in the liberal tradition of Francis Parkman, romanticize life on the banks of the Saint Lawrence. Bishop Saint-Vallier knew that French society in North America was fragile and that it would not survive on strength of arms alone.

The documentary sources of the mission endeavor in New France illustrate the existence of three versions of religious culture: those of the learned clergy, the ordinary settlers, and the Amerindians. The first two were transplanted from Europe, while the latter had already been a part of the American environment for centuries. The Christianity carried by the clergy to New France reflected the religious developments of metropolitan France. Characterized as devout and rigoristic, its foundation came from the Tridentine reforms of the previous century. But the settlers' Christianity, a rich mixture of the profane and the sacred, remained largely untouched by the post-Tridentine reforms. At best the settlers perceived clerical reform as a tolerable intrusion. Lay and learned culture at times conflicted and at time cooperated in the effort to establish French Catholicism in America. Of course the conflict of cultures was common both to Old and New France, but a unique element was present in New France: the American environment. Theo-

¹⁷ASQ, Lettres, carton M, no. 52, M. Dudoyt à Mgr. de Laval, 9 mars 1681; see note 5, this paper.

¹⁸*Découvertes et établissements des français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale*, Pierre Margry, ed., 6 vols. (Paris: 1876-1886), 2:178-83; NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 5, p. 52, Duchesneau au Ministre, 10 novembre 1679; NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 5, pp. 293-94, Duchesneau au Ministre, 13 novembre 1681. "Accuse M. de Frontenac d'être intelligent avec les coureurs de bois."

¹⁹NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 47, p. 273, L'Évêque de Québec à (illegible), 4 octobre 1725.

retically, it offered the clergy an opportunity to transplant Christianity in a land free from the religious conflicts of Europe. America also presented the French with an alien religious culture equally capable of challenging and enriching the peoples who encountered it.²⁰

Just as it was possible for Indians to become in some real sense "French," it was possible for the colonists to abandon much of French civilization for native ways. Besides the missionaries, the French living in closest proximity to the Amerindians were the *coureurs de bois*. Most of them were illiterate, and their Christianity was reflective of the ordinary Frenchman. The gap in some ways was small between Amerindian religion and the popular Christianity of the *coureur de bois*. Consequently, Bishop Saint-Vallier was not alone in expressing his displeasure regarding the American religious scene.

To the great disappointment of clerical authorities and missionaries, most *coureurs de bois* were little concerned with the proprieties of Christian religion. Father Étienne de Carheil notified Governor Calliers in the summer of 1702 that there could be no hope for *coureurs* living among the Indians for "more than fifteen years."²¹ At home in Amerindian culture, these fur traders would not "abstain"²² from the religious practices the missionaries deplored. Fathers Pierre Marest and Jean-Marie de Villes denounced the *coureur de bois* Étienne Bourgmund, who married in the Indian fashion and fathered a son in 1714.²³ The missionaries wrote that he was leading a life which was not only scandalous, but also criminal, in that he was causing disorders among the Illinois.

Bourgmund was not the only *coureur de bois* to disrupt the mission work among the Illinois at Kaskaskia. In 1699, Father Jacques Gravier of the mission Immaculée Conception de Notre Dame complained about "libertine" *voyageurs* who "care most for their merchandise" and "prevent people from embracing our holy faith."²⁴

When Father Gravier approached the commandant of the fort regarding these affairs, he only "gloated over it, that the Frenchmen disrupt prayers of the Indians in chapel."²⁵ In addition, the beleaguered

²⁰Scalberg, "Religious Life," 345-46.

²¹*Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., 73 vols. (Cleveland: 1896-1901), 65:227.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Dictionary*, 2:645.

²⁴*Jesuit Relations*, 64:197.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 201.

missionary observed that some of the French attempted to halt the "catechism" of Christian Indians, claiming that the Jesuits taught "nothing but falsehoods."²⁶

Many illegal traders were also settling in the Illinois Country, at Peoria and, after 1700, at the new mission villages of Kaskaskia and Cahokia on the Mississippi River. Cahokia, in particular, seemed to attract the criminals of the trade. In 1715, Governor Ramezay and Intendant Michel Bégon reported that "about one hundred coureurs escaped to Cahokia where they joined forty-seven others who had previously settled there."²⁷ The town, they declared, was "a retreat for the lawless men both of this colony and of Louisiana." The wives of these men were by and large Kaskaskias and Peorias, judging from the Jesuit complaints.²⁸

As late as 1750, Father Vivier, who worked among the Illinois, remarked about the high population of "half-breeds born as a rule against the law of God" in the villages along the Mississippi frequented by French fur traders.²⁹ In addition, Father Le Petit characterized the French living among the Illinois as "frivolous and dissolute." They never attend "holy mass and receive the sacraments" and are "less well instructed in religion as are those [Indian] Neophytes."³⁰ The missionaries praised the conduct of the Christian Illinois but found few "pious" Christians among the *coureurs de bois*.³¹

The best efforts of the missionaries to check the *coureurs*' "impiety," irreverence," "immorality," and "skepticism" largely failed. French opposition to the "Christianization" of the Indians was widespread. Father Louis Davaugour of the Lorette mission wrote in 1710 that the "corrupt morals and criminal examples" of the *coureurs de bois* destroy the word of the gospel among the "barbarians. . . . Corruption and

²⁶Ibid., 211.

²⁷Joseph Jablow, *Indians of Illinois and Indiana: Kickapoo and Patawatomi Indians* (New York: 1979), 120, 123; Natalia Marlee Belting, *Kaskaskia Under the French Regime* (Urbana, Illinois: 1948), 12-15.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Jesuit Relations, 69:145.

³⁰For some comments by Rameau de Saint-Pierre on this subject, see *Collection de documents inédits sur le Canada et l'Amérique publiés par le Canada-Français*, 3 vols. (Québec: 1888-1889), 3:134-38. Until recently, historians traditionally denied the existence of Amerindian ancestry within the contemporary French-Canadian community. In this camp, see: Cyprien Tanguay, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles canadiennes depuis la fondation de la colonie jusqu'à nos jours*, 7 vols. (Québec: 1871-1890); Émile Salomé, *La Colonisation de la Nouvelle-France* (Paris: 1906); Lionel Groulx, *La Naissance d'une race* (Montréal: 1938), 24-27; Marcel Trudel, *La Population du Canada en 1663* (Montréal: 1973), 27-28, 149.

³¹Dickason, "One Nation," 23.

drunkenness . . . is spread far and wide by the greed of the European traders."³²

The striking feature of these observations is the ease with which the French left French "civilization" and lived among the regions of Amerindian sovereignty. Admittedly, while there were cultural differences between French and Indian in the seventeenth century, there must have been many similarities as well. French civil officials and missionaries were certainly inclined to view the Indians' way of life as devil worship.³³ Other Frenchmen, especially those involved in the fur trade, took a different approach in evaluating Indian lifestyles.

That most colonial authorities found *coureur de bois* behavior to be "irreligious," "impious," "superstitious," "irreverent," and "scandalous" is monotonously clear to anyone who examines these documents. More difficult to discern is what Amerindian rituals attracted the participation of the French fur traders. This is further complicated by the lack of written documents from the Amerindian perspective. Few descriptions are available. The *coureurs de bois*' most intimate association with the native American tribes involved ritual ceremonies. These rituals reveal something of the Indian perception of the *coureurs de bois*. Therefore, a few cases are worth examining.

The Amerindians believed themselves equal or superior as human beings to the French and remained confident of the criteria by which they judged the world. The most important problem they faced was not how to adjust to the fur traders, but how to incorporate these men and their trading goods into their respective societies. This was most effectively accomplished through intermarriage. While the missionaries admitted they were unable to regularize all mixed marriages on the frontier, the Indians used miscegenation as a means of integrating the *coureurs de bois* into the economic and social life of the tribes. Frustrated colonial officials learned that French fur traders lived in Indian villages with their families apart from the French outposts and that the children of these unions tended to adopt the Indian life.³⁴

³²*Jesuit Relations*, 66:149.

³³*Ibid.*; 66:151; 64:277; 64:221; 65:203; 68:73; 65:65.

³⁴Numerous *coureurs de bois* permanently settled with their Indian wives near frontier posts such as Mackinac. Jacqueline Peterson identified the names of many of the permanent settlers of mixed marriages from the baptismal registers; among these names were the "Langlades, Bertrands, Desrivières, Amelins, Bourassas, Chaboyers, Ainses, Blondeaus, and Chevaliers." See Jacqueline Peterson, "Many Roads to Red River: Métis Genesis in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1815," in *New Peoples*, 48. On the subject of miscegenation at Mackinac, Professor Peterson writes, "By far the largest number of marriages (forty-eight percent) joined Canadian employees of the fur trade to Indian or métis women." (p. 48)

The *coureurs de bois* forged alliances with head men and important traders by marrying native women *à la façon du pays*. Significantly, in its early stages, marriage *à la façon du pays* was mainly derived from Indian rituals. "Amerindian society," writes Olive Dickason, "with its stress on kinship, much preferred such a relationship as a basis for trading alliances."³⁵ As far as the Indians were concerned, it was perfectly acceptable for a European trader to marry among the tribes, even if he were known to have another wife back in his own community.³⁶

The truly shocking aspect of the situation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly for a France in the throes of the Counter Reformation, was the fact that Frenchmen, raised in the true Christian faith, "became savage simply because they lived with them."³⁷ It was a phenomenon which drew considerable denunciation from authorities; the very prevalence of such thundering suggests the extent of the problem.³⁸

Despite their linguistic and cultural differences, the Amerindians shared enough beliefs and practices to allow generalization and comparison with Christianity. The Indians mobilized the supernatural in their world by a number of religious observances and rituals. Historian James Axtell observes that "tobacco was frequently burned to appease or open communication with the more powerful spirits of nature, and pipe smoke was blown upon an object which seemed to be inhabited by a guardian or 'owner' spirit."³⁹ Just as the *truchement* (interpreter) Étienne Brulé made an "offering of tobacco" to a rock spirit, so later *coureurs de bois* participated in a similar ritual.⁴⁰ In 1686, Pierre de Troyes was given command of a campaign against the "unauthorized traders" of the Hudson Bay region.⁴¹ In his journal, the Chevalier de Troyes commented on French fur traders who mixed Indian and Catholic religious ritual. He observed that the French make their

³⁵Dickason, "One Nation," 24.

³⁶Robert-Lionel Séguin, *La Vie libertine en Nouvelle-France au XVII^e siècle*, 2 vols., (Montréal: 1972), 2:47. For documents regarding mixed marriages, see NAC, MG1, série C13B, no. 6, f. 5, Bienville au Ministre, 10 octobre 1706; NAC, MG1, série C13A, vol. 3, p. 13, Cadillac au Ministre, 26 octobre 1713.

³⁷Gabriel Sagard, *Histoire du Canada et voyages que les frères mineurs recollets y ont faits pour la conversion des infidèles depuis l'an 1615* (Paris: 1636), 166.

³⁸For documents relating the efforts of clergy to regularize marriages on the frontier, see: NAC, MG1, série C13A, vol. 4, pp. 542-43, Cadillac au Ministre, 23 janvier 1716; NAC, MG1, série C13A, vol. 4, pp. 255-56, Mariage de François avec les sauvagesses, 1^{er} septembre 1716; NAC, Collection Moreau Saint Méry, MG1, série F3, vol. 242, f. 142v, La Chaise à la Compagnie, 25 mars 1729.

³⁹Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 16-17.

⁴⁰Sagard, *Histoire*, 496.

⁴¹*Dictionary* 1:653.

sacrifice with "a little bit of tobacco . . . at a location held sacred by the Indians." ⁴² In addition, writes de Troyes, "Our French customarily baptize at the sacred place those who have not yet passed by." ⁴³ That a few *coureurs de bois* willingly incorporated a Christian baptism into Indian spirit ritual as a rite of passage does not convict any of them of wholesale adoption of Indian cosmology. Yet it seems clear that *coureur de bois* Christianity as it developed in regions of Amerindian sovereignty attempted to harmonize elements of two different forms of religious practice, without any critical examination of logical unity. According to the missionaries, the *coureurs de bois* "cared chiefly for their merchandise" and not for the Indians' "spiritual state." ⁴⁴ Admittedly, Christian mission was not a major priority of most French fur traders. Therefore, syncretism was one way for the French to promote favorable relationships with the tribes of the west.

Furthermore, the *coureurs de bois* embraced Indian ritual for countering bodily dangers. The Indians introduced the French to steamy sessions of recollection and chanting in sweat lodges in order to bring relief and purify the soul. Father Pierre Laure, working among the Algonquin in the 1720s, recounted that "some [French] caused themselves to be sweated with the usual superstitions. They heat stones red hot. . . the French of the posts hardly ever have recourse to any other remedy." ⁴⁵

In other ways, *coureurs de bois* utilized Indian rituals. Some, it was reported, even conducted themselves as Indians when facing death. Captured and tortured by the Chickasaw, "the French sang in the manner of the savages." ⁴⁶ Henri Tonti attested that many "coureurs de bois participate in dances, mimic Indian attitudes, mingle with them, cry, and sing." ⁴⁷ According to ethnohistorian Francis Jennings, "Indian rituals were often held outdoors, whether they involved a community dance or the deeply private sojourning in a wild place of the individual

⁴²My translation. *Journal de l'expédition du chevalier de Troyes à la Baie de Hudson en 1686*, Ivanhoe Caron, ed (Beauceville: 1918), 37.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴*Jesuit Relations*, 64:179.

⁴⁵*Jesuit Relations*, 68:73.

⁴⁶My translation. NAC, MG1, série F13, vol. 24, p. 250, Lettre de novembre 1736.

⁴⁷My translation. *New Voyages to North America by the Baron de Lahontan*, Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., 2 vols. (New York: 1905), 1:193; *Jesuit Relations*, 47:246; Louis Joseph de Montcalm, *Journal du marquis de Montcalm durant ses campagnes en Canada de 1756 à 1759* (Québec: 1895), 465; Henri de Tonti, "Relation de Louisiane et du Mississippi," in *Relations de la Louisiane, et du fleuve Mississippi*, Jean Bernard, ed. (Amsterdam: 1720), 14.

seeking a dream or trance revelation."⁴⁸ The snowshoe dances of the Saint Lawrence and Great Lakes tribes honored the north wind for bringing the first snow and *coureurs de bois* were known to have participated in these rituals.⁴⁹ Father Le Petit chastised a group of *coureurs de bois* for "chanting their frivolous and often dissolute songs" Indian style.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Tonti, himself a *voyageur* and trading post commander, explained that the fur traders often "adopt tattooing,"⁵¹ covering nearly their entire body with pictures "Indian style."⁵² Some, Tonti noted, mixed Christian symbols with Indian, "using an image of the Virgin, Christ Child, and a large cross on the stomach."⁵³

I have argued that while few French fully adopted Indian cosmology, many of them integrated native American rituals into their Christian belief system. The *coureur de bois* utilized this selective syncretism in hunting excursions, tattooing, dancing, singing, and warfare. While some *coureurs de bois* "continued nearly in the same life on their return to the colony,"⁵⁴ many easily made the transition back to respectability and the external constraints of Catholic religiosity "to assure . . . salvation by the use of sacraments."⁵⁵

The missionaries zealously sought to protect the "morals" of the native peoples through the propagation of Christianity. The fugitive *voyageur* countered the Church's efforts to crimp "libertine" lifestyle through irreverence and anticlericalism. Yet the clerical accusation that fugitive *voyageurs* "lacked religion"⁵⁶ was just a derisive exaggeration. What the *coureur de bois* lost in setting aside the liturgical and sacramental elements of Catholicism, he replaced with the personalized and universal religiosity of the native peoples. For the French youth, the Amerindian life held a far greater attraction than the limitations imposed by colonial and clerical authority.

As in the mother country, there were those colonists who could not resist the lure of profit, the call to vagabondage, or the desire to be far

⁴⁸Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York: 1975), 49.

⁴⁹*Jesuit Relations*, 65:75. Father Binneteau writes regarding Illinois dances and French involvement during the winter of 1699.

⁵⁰*Jesuit Relations*, 68:211.

⁵¹My translation. Tonti, *Relation de Louisiane*, 14.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 22, ff. 362-64, Mémoire à Pontchartrain, 12 décembre 1705.

⁵⁵*Jesuit Relations*, 8:247, 257.

⁵⁶NAC, MG1, série C13A, vol. 4, p. 532, Mémoire sur la Louisiane, 2 janvier 1716.

from the sources of authority. The North American environment posed a unique cultural challenge to French Catholicism. The possibility of the French "going native" became a concern of lay and clerical authorities alike. This fear found expression in the person of the *coureur de bois*. A despised, yet vital part of the French colonial economy, the illegal trader willingly set aside the sacramental life of the Church in order to enjoy the "free life" in the territorial zones controlled by the Amerindian.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Back in Québec, bishops of New France were principally preoccupied with establishing ecclesiastical structures in which to nourish the faithful in the New World. As a product of the Counter Reformation, Bishop Saint-Vallier believed it was his responsibility to promote the benefits of Tridentine Catholicism among the parishioners of New France.⁵⁸ The reform minded bishop zealously embraced the opportunity to transplant Christianity anew. In so doing, he relied heavily upon the mechanisms that produced a measure of devotional conformity in Old France: catechetical instruction, devotional confraternities, and clerical censorship.⁵⁹

That the ordinary settler neither embraced the vision of a renewed Church in a new land nor manifested much sympathy for Christian asceticism should not surprise us. The people of New France were no different than their cousins they left behind. They smoked, joked, and gossiped in the church and drank, swore, and raced their horses just outside the church door. The French-Canadian laity clung to a very different conception of the mass's place in community life. Although they viewed the mass as an act of worship, they felt that it was entirely proper to integrate the profane with the sacred.⁶⁰ The Tridentine Church found their parishioners' "scandalous" behavior an intrusion upon divine worship. Therefore, the issue of the sacramental life was not simply a matter of appropriate conduct, but rather of a conflict between two conceptions of the place of ritual in the colonial community. The

⁵⁷Jaenen, *Friend and Foe*, 184; Axtell, *Invasion Within*, 300.

⁵⁸Dixon, "Episcopat," 112.

⁵⁹Marie-Aimée Cliche, *Les Pratiques de dévotion en Nouvelle-France: Comportements populaires et encadrement ecclésial dans le gouvernement de Québec* (Québec: 1988), 135-234.

⁶⁰Cornelius Jaenen, *The Role of the Church in New France* (Toronto: 1976), 122-24.

French inhabitants of North America were not yet willing to accept the prohibition against mixing the sacred and the profane.

Therefore, Bishop Saint-Vallier had some justification for writing in 1725 that the Church in New France faced an uncertain future. The surveillance of souls begun under his predecessor, Bishop Laval, was a tall order for an infant Church deposited on the banks of the major commercial route of the Amerindians. The clerical vision of establishing a Church under the highest ideals of reform Catholicism in a new land was immediately tempered by colonial realities. First, while the French settlers admired the asceticism and commitment of their bishops, they did not aspire to the same rigoristic standards as their pastors. The colonists enjoyed their drink, coarse talk, and masquerades. They stubbornly refused to separate the profane from the sacred in their religious observances. Second, the scarce French population transplanted on the banks of the Saint Lawrence was overextended, and the church was ill-equipped to maintain a level of sacramental life that post-Tridentine standards demanded. Third, and most important for our discussion here, the French were in a foreign land controlled by Amerindian societies which seemed to lure young Canadians away from the Church in droves. Bishop Saint-Vallier faced stiff resistance, not only from Amerindian culture, but also from the settlers who brought their lay religious mentality with them. Religious administration in New France was a nightmare, even for talented and dedicated men like Saint-Vallier. It is no wonder he wrote at the end of his episcopacy that "*la foi ici est en danger.*"⁶¹

⁶¹NAC, MG1, série C11A, vol. 47, pp. 265-73, L'Évêque de Québec à (document illegible), 4 octobre 1725.